

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **God Speaks “Man to Man”**

(Hebrews 1)

#### **Introduction: The hardest thing we do...**

Over the years I have received lots and lots of advice given out to pastors. One bit of advice resurrects every few years, and then, thankfully - usually quickly - goes the way of all flesh.

It is the counsel of cowards that pastors should not have friends in the church they serve. The advice goes, “People will hurt you.” OK. I get it. But the advice is diabolical.

For every time I have been hurt (and I have no idea how many times I’ve been the one who has been the one causing pain!), there are a dozen times when my friendships here have proved the difference between life and despair.

Often, I have regained my personal balance as a result of a fifteen minute phone conversation, an honest exchange over lunch, or an evening of fellowship.

Like you, my spirit is fed when soul meets soul through good, honest, loving interaction with my brothers and sisters in Christ. What a gift when our communication with each other is stimulating, penetrating, and edifying. It happens.

And then, there are those other days...

*How are you REALLY doing?*

Unfortunately, we have all been on the receiving end of some pretty inane, meaningless talk.

Like when someone asks us, “*How’s it going?*” as they pass us by. They are often not really requesting information. It’s just something to say.

And, if we fault the asker for being insincere, we usually play along. Even on the worst of days, we may answer, “*Fine, thanks. And you?*”

If our greetings border on meaninglessness, our more lengthy conversations can also be pointless.

Haven’t we all found ourselves in conversations where the exchange of ideas was less than stimulating?

Let’s face it. Sometimes we have been the very ones who have kept the “small talk” going to the point of absurdity! (I mean, just how often and for long can I possibly go on about the weather?!)

“Conversation” is sometimes a misnomer. Dialogue implies a give and take exchange between two people. But how many times have we been part of a conversation where the point is not to exchange, but to impress?

All too often, “communication” really isn’t. All too often we talk and then impatiently wait for our friend to finish so that we can talk again.

Communication like that carries no punch. There’s no impact and no help.

*Let’s not forget insincerity*

And then, if we are cataloguing communication that is unhelpful, we would have to include insincerity. Sometimes, our communication goes past the line of harmless triviality.

Sad to say, words are spoken, and communication takes place which is harmful - and intentionally so. People tell lies and deceive. They cover their real meanings.

Sometimes, speech between people made in the image and likeness of God is just plain mean and ugly.

Talk like that hurts! Who among us has not been on the receiving end of such speech (who among us has not dished it out)?

*Then, of course, there is “garbled”*

Finally, even if our intention is to do good and to speak deeply, the possibility still exists that our attempts at communication will not be successful.

How many times have you wanted to tell the people you love most in life how much you love them, only to have that communication fall flat?

Or, you wanted to give helpful, constructive criticism, and it comes across as scolding? Or, your sincere compliments don’t make much of an impression.

Sometimes, our best attempts at communication result in lack of understanding.

Now, in sharp contrast to the communication of man, which often falls short of its intended goal, we have the communication of God. We can be grateful today that God is a perfect Communicator!

## **A Communicating God**

### **God’s Commitment to Communication**

God has spoken in the beauty of the natural world. Look at nature and we see God “speaking” of His power, His creativity, His artistic genius. The creation reveals the Creator.

And beyond this general communication of God in nature, we have the more specific revelation of God in His written Word.

From Genesis to Revelation, we read of a God who is consistently holy, righteous, just, loving, gracious, and merciful, all knowing and eternal.

### **What if....?**

Can you imagine the world we would have had God not spoken? What if God was present, but silent?

What if, as we looked at the world around us, there were no hints of a Creator? What if we had no John 3:16 to tell us that God “*so loved the world?*”

What if God were not committed to communication and there was only silence?

Well, thankfully, God **has** spoken! And His words make an impact wherever they fall. They do something. The words of God are powerful.

From the very first words of Genesis 1 - “*Let there be light*” - God’s words have made an impact.

Much farther into the Bible, near the end of the New Testament, the author of the book of Hebrews writes about the communications of God with man.

There is no question but that God has communicated to man through the ages. Hebrews 1:1 says that God “*spoke long ago to the fathers... in many ways.*” Well, what are some of the ways in which He spoke to the fathers?

### **God’s Communications in The Past (Hebrew 1:1)**

*[1] God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways*

#### **God Spoke in “many ways”**

*God spoke in visions and dreams*

Sometimes, God spoke to people through visions of the night and through dreams.

God gave Abraham a vision that let him know that his descendants would inherit the land of Canaan.

Joseph dreamed dreams that predicted his family's future. His interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams led to his family's salvation.

*God spoke through miracles*

At times, God "communicated" something about Himself by the miraculous. If a picture is worth a thousand words, a miracle is worth more. God spoke very clearly to the Egyptians about His power by the ten plagues preceding the Exodus (another great miracle).

The prophets Elijah and Elisha performed lots and lots of miracles that "spoke" of the power of God. People were raised from the dead, iron ax-heads floated to the surface of rivers, droughts were invoked and rain was sent.

God's "miraculous memos" are exclamation marks to His ability to do whatever He wants whenever He wants to do it. Miracles testify to His power. They communicate something about His intervening, meddling ways.

*God spoke by direct thunderings from heaven*

Sometimes, God has communicated by spoken words. He spoke with Moses from a burning bush. He thundered from Sinai with the people trembling at the foot of the mountain.

*God spoke through prophetic utterances*

Then, if you'll flip through the prophetic books of the Old Testament, you will find dozens of communications from God, given in the form of prophecies.

In these messages, the Lord literally spoke by using the mouthpieces of the human prophets. He rebuked the nation of Israel for her sin (forthtelling), and he told them what was going to happen to them in the future (foretelling).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> God has even been known to use non-humans to get across His message, as in angels and Balaam's donkey! (Numbers 22).

God certainly has spoken to mankind. If nothing else, all of the modes of expression that God has used convince us that He wants to communicate with us.

But, in the Old Testament communication from God to man, something was always missing.

**God Spoke in "Portions"**

Hebrews 1 tells us, "*God...spoke long ago to the fathers...in many PORTIONS*"

God's communication in past times was always true, always appropriate. But it was also never complete.

According to the New Testament, the reason that God's previous communications were not "complete" was because **GOD spoke as GOD to MAN**. The "gap" that existed between man and God was never bridged.

But, God was so committed to communication, so committed to letting us know more about Him, to bringing us into relationship with Himself, that He finally bridged that gap.

Back to the words of Hebrews 1. In verse 2 we read *[2] in these last days, He has spoken to us in His Son.*<sup>2</sup>

If you had wondered how this was all going to tie back in with Christmas, now you see.

In Jesus, God's communication to us is not "*in portion*" but complete because (incredibly). In Jesus, **GOD has spoken as MAN to MAN!**

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<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the Greek does not include the definite article with "Son." Reading along in Greek, one translates, "In these last days, God has spoken in Son..." The lack of the article gives the noun, Son, an adjectival status, perhaps giving the sense, "In these last days, God has spoken 'Son-wise.'"

## **God Has NOW Spoken To Us in His Son (Hebrews 1:2-3a)**

*[2] in these last days [God] has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. [3a] And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high*

### **God Speaks Through the Son, the Heir of All Things**

Listen to those words. We hear rapid fire remarks about Jesus, each one of them prompting worship:

- As God's one and only eternal Son, Jesus is the rightful heir of all the riches of God;
- Jesus is the active agent of creation. We remember how the apostle John started off his Gospel with the same thought. *[1] In the beginning was the Word. [2] And the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. [3] All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.*
- Jesus, the Son of God, is the power controlling the universe, keeping the whole enterprise going by His Word;
- Jesus made purification of OUR sins by His sacrifice on the cross;
- Having finished the work He came to earth to accomplish, Jesus has now "sat down."

Far from being a statement that the Lord got tired, this comment that Jesus "sat down" it is a profound statement of completion.

We are taken back to the Old Testament place of worship - the Temple. While there were many furnishings in the innermost chamber of the Temple, known as the Holy of Holies, one item was always missing: a chair.

There was no need for a chair because the work of the priest was never done. There was always one more offering to bring, one more sacrifice to make.

But now that Jesus has finished His work (the work of salvation) there is nothing else left to do. So, He sat down.

Through Jesus, God speaks of His creative work. Through Jesus, God speaks of His redemptive work. In fact, through Jesus, God speaks more completely to mankind than He ever had before in history.

### **The Son is the Best Communication We Have from God about God**

As Hebrews says,

*[3b] And He is the radiance of His glory, and the exact representation of His nature*

Whatever we might have wanted to know about God, we discover by looking at Jesus. Every aspect of His life shouts "GOD!"

Consider His miracles.

*God speaks through Jesus' miracles*

Turning water into wine was just the beginning. From there he gave sight to a man born blind, healed the lame, cast out demons, walked on water, fed multitudes, cleansed lepers, and raised the dead!

Anyone who wants demonstrable proof of God's existence need only look at Jesus' miracles.

*God speaks through Jesus' teachings*

Or, consider His teachings. At the conclusion of His Sermon on the Mount, people stood with their mouths wide open - they had never heard anyone teach like THAT before!

His ethical teachings forever raised the bar of human conduct. Jesus dealt with motivation as well as behavior.

Parables, God stories in street clothes, were Jesus favorite form of teaching. We remember the Good Samaritan, the Lost Sheep, the Prodigal Son, the Sower and the Soils, because they help us see our world, ourselves, and God more clearly.

In all His teachings, Jesus communicated the wisdom and the love and the justice of God.

*God speaks through Jesus' crucifixion*

When we come to the very end of His life, King Jesus is not seated on a throne. He is nailed to a cross. But, that is not a sign of weakness. It speaks of love.

It was Jesus' choice to die on a Roman cross, because in no other way could He win salvation except by offering Himself as a sacrifice for sinful men and women.

From the cross, Jesus shouts the crystal clear message of God's love.

*God speaks through Jesus' resurrection!*

Then, after having been killed on a Friday, those who came to embalm His body on Sunday found the tomb empty.

He had been raised from the dead. Of all the powers that hold sway over humanity, none is so relentless and non-negotiable as death. And yet, Jesus broke the chains of death as though they were nothing. Not even death could hold Jesus.

By the resurrection, God communicated His awesome power, once and for all.

There is no doubt about it. Looking at any phase of the life of Jesus is looking at God Himself! In Jesus we see God's wisdom, His love, and His power.

But, what about the festival we celebrate every December 25? What about Christmas? In what way is God speaking to us, communicating to us, through the events we celebrate at this time of year?

As we turn to consider the birth of Jesus we consider a wholly different mode of speech than what God used at any other time.

Clearly, Hallmark never met a holiday it didn't love. Halloween, Valentine's Day, Grandparent's Day, Groundhog Day all provide opportunities to market their wares, sell cards and trinkets.

I don't know if Hallmark loves Jesus or not, but I'm sure Hallmark loves Christmas! The card shops have a field day in the weeks leading up to Christmas.

The cards sold are feel-good masterpieces. They depict happy animals, not just the barnyard variety, but mice and chipmunks, too.

A favorite theme is the New England farm covered with snow. Add a horse drawn sleigh and you've got a winner. Solitary evergreen trees on a snowfield are always popular.

In the religious section of the Christmas card racks you'll find serene images of the holy family gathered around a manger with a halo-wrapped Baby smiling up at you.

Now I hope, of course, that each of us will enjoy the most Jesus-filled Christmas we have ever known. It is my fervent prayer that this season has been, for you, a rich experience of worship and that today - Christmas Day! - is for you a GREAT time of remembering God's great gift of His Son.

But when God sent out His first Christmas message there was no hint of happy chipmunks, no beautiful scenes of New England farms, no serene families or babies with halos.

When we open our Bibles and see how it really was two thousand years ago when Jesus was born, we'll find that the card shops have it all wrong. The New Testament picture of Christmas is profoundly different from what is marketed to us.

Without spending much time here (we've seen them already in previous weeks), consider...

**God's Special Communication through the Son's Birth**

**The Uglies of Christmas**

The young couple we meet in Matthew and Luke was dirt poor. We know this because of the sacrifice Mary and Joseph offered when they dedicated Jesus in the Temple on the eighth day of His life.

They offered turtledoves, the offering presented by the poorest of society. (Luke 2:22-24)

As they traveled the one hundred miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem on rough roads through rugged territory in the dead of winter, Mary was on the verge of going into labor.

And why were they traveling from Galilee to Bethlehem? So that they could register for Caesar's census in order to pay taxes.

And when it came time for Jesus to be born, He was born in the same place where there was an animal's feeding trough - and that feeding trough would serve as His first crib.

All around us at this time of year we see beautiful Christmas manger scenes - in front yards, at churches. But I ask you, from a strictly objective standpoint, what is so beautiful about this story?

Not much. But, it is the ugliness of the story of Jesus' birth that draws us like a magnet to worship the newborn King.

It is the ugliness that communicates something about God that we might not have ever known had He entered the world in some more beautiful, grandiose, kingly way.

### **The Beauty of Christmas' Uglies**

The kind of birth Jesus experienced in Bethlehem tells us that God was willing to do whatever it took understand and to enter into the worst of human suffering.

He really understands any hardship that you may now or may ever experience, because He voluntarily took suffering, humiliation, and deprivation upon Himself.

The manner of Jesus' entrance into the world **communicates**. It tells us about how God works, generally.

Not in blinding lights from heaven; not in impressive displays of power; not in spectacular manifestations of omnipotence.

Christmas celebrates the power of weakness. Jesus comes to us in the form of a helpless newborn - vulnerability in its purest form. In Bethlehem's stables we see God in His majestic humility.

### **Conclusion:**

During one of my blessed opportunities to serve in Russia, I had a chance to enjoy fellowship with some of the students I was teaching at the Bible school in Kursk over an afternoon tea.

Through the ten years I was privileged to travel to Russia I came to love the people of Russia. They are big-hearted folks with great spiritual sensitivity. And I truly love the Russian church.

That doesn't mean that the Russian church is perfect. No church is, and each church is subject to particular weaknesses.

Knowing one of the weaknesses that generally plague Russian churches, I asked a question of the students at this tea party.

We were all sitting around a big table, enjoying fellowship. Trying to get to the heart of a matter, I asked,

*"Would you tell me what you think of this statement? 'THE MOST POWERFUL MOTIVATOR IN ALL THE WORLD FOR CHRISTLIKE LIVING IS GRACE.' Do you agree or disagree with that statement?"*

There was a general nodding of heads all around the table.

Without exception, every one of my Russian friends agreed with my statement that grace was the greatest possible motivation for a Christian to follow the Lord.

What God has done for us moves us to want to live for Him!

But then, first one, and then another, volunteered, *"But you can't run a church like that."* Pretty soon, most everyone was agreeing.

*"Grace is good. But when you want to really accomplish something, you need to rely on other things. Things more practical."*

I was not surprised, but I was greatly saddened. Deeply entrenched in the Russian church are the twin sins of authoritarianism and legalism.

There are reasons for their presence, of course. But these deadening tendencies are present in most every Russian church I have been associated with, and others who have been there have seen the same thing.

While our Russian friends admit to the power of grace, they won't trust its power in everyday life.

They believe that they will get better results by law and by telling people what to do. Top-down leadership is more beneficial, in a practical sense (they believe) than proclaiming and living out grace, freedom and liberty.

Grace is for dreamers. Law is the way to get things done.

Political leaders the world over know the same thing. Presidents and Prime Ministers and Kings and Dictators use their authority to coerce compliance. That's just the way it is.

But one King, born two thousand years ago, chose to play the game by different rules. He didn't recognize the principle of coercion. He embraced the authority that comes with personal submission and weakness.

King Jesus doesn't rule like most rulers rule. And He didn't enter the world He created as most Kings would have chosen.

In God's works throughout human history, He has shouted through visions, dreams, thunderings from heaven, and prophetic revelations.

In His own life, Jesus shouted through the wisdom of His teachings, the power of His miracles, the love of the cross, and the glory of the resurrection.

All of these shoutings successfully move us to worship God and give Him His due! But, Bethlehem is God communicating differently.

In the birth of Jesus, God took the risk of acting on the principles of grace, weakness, helplessness, and "divine shyness."

Bethlehem is God whispering, not shouting. And I believe it is His most persuasive invitation to us to worship.

He didn't coerce those at the barn to worship - but some did. Shepherds came from their flocks to worship the Baby. Some time later, while Jesus was still very young, wise men came from the east, to give their own praise.

Today, as we celebrate the miracle of God speaking "*Man to man*", let's join the shepherds and wise men. Let us come and adore Him!

The apostle Paul said it best in 2 Corinthians 8:9, "***For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.***"

This morning, we worship a Jesus who did not come as Kings come. We worship a Savior, who is Christ the Lord, who became the Son of Man that we might become the sons and daughters of God through Him.